

Preserving rare languages

Embracing the future

Modern technology can save languages as well as destroy them

THE phrase “**use it or lose it**” applies to few things more forcefully than to **obscure** languages. A tongue that is not spoken will **shrivel into extinction**. If it is lucky, it may be preserved in a specialist lexicographer’s dictionary in the way that a dried **specimen** of a vanished butterfly lingers in a museum cabinet. If it is unlucky, it will disappear forever into the memory hole that is unwritten history.

This is not a fate which **appeals to** K. David Harrison, of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. But Dr Harrison is an optimist. He believes information technology—something seen by many people as **a threat to** linguistic **diversity**—might actually **turn out to** be its **saviour**.

On the face of things, there are few more powerful forces for the **extermination** of languages than IT. The internet, in particular, looks like a threat. It spreads **imperious**, widely spoken tongues like English **at the expense of** more modest, local ones, as an introduced **species** of animal or plant **drives out** less **robust** natives. Dr Harrison, however, is helping speakers of threatened languages use IT to fight back.

He gave details of four projects, in India, Oregon, Papua New Guinea and Siberia. In some, remaining speakers of the local language numbered in the hundreds when the project began. In one, but a single individual truly knew the tongue.

The first task in each case was to create a talking dictionary that could be **put onto the web**, to which speakers and **would-be speakers** of the language then had access. This job itself illuminated the **quirky way** that technology spreads.

The two villages in Papua New Guinea which speak Matukar Panau, for example, were linked to the country’s **electricity grid** only in 2011, but almost immediately people there started using the internet and the dictionary Dr Harrison had helped to create. In Oregon, meanwhile, many now text each other in Siletz Dee-ni. This was the tongue that had only one fluent speaker at the beginning of the project, but with his help and that of a few others who had partial knowledge of the language, Dr Harrison and his team have built a talking dictionary containing 14,000 words.

Something similar will happen soon, they hope, in the part of north-eastern India where Koro-Aka is spoken. Here, people had mobile phones before **drivable roads** arrived and were thus **familiar with** the technology. Dr Harrison thinks that when the Koro-Aka dictionary is complete, texting in the language will **take off** rapidly.

The most **advanced** project of the four is in Tuva, in southern Siberia, where Russian is becoming the dominant language. A talking dictionary of Tuvan has existed since 2006. Apocryphally, natives of the Arctic have hundreds of words for different sorts of snow. But the Tuvans really do have dozens for the colours and patterns of goat fleeces. They also have three versions of the verb “to go”, whose correct usage **depends on** the direction of travel **in relation to** the direction of the local river’s current. All these and more are now available to Tuvan and non-Tuvan **alike**. Indeed, **according to** Dr Harrison, the worldwide nature of the web has spawned at least one long-distance relationship, between a Texan man and a Tuvan woman, conducted in her language.

What these projects **have in common**, and what is most likely to make them **succeed**, though, is not just the technology. It is that in each place there is an enthusiastic local who is wise enough **to care about** saving his heritage and young enough to see that this requires embracing modernity. Sometimes that has involved the enthusiast in clashes with tribal elders who want to keep the modern world **at bay** and preserve their cultures **in aspic**. But that will not work. In the words of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, for everything to stay the same, everything must change. If it does not, everything will be lost.